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AUTHOR Rose, Shirley
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ABSTRACT

Students write a great deal during their school years, but they apparently never realize that writing affects their lives outside of school and can often even be important to their success. Research on the composing process has enabled teachers to separate the writing process from its product, but theory, practice, and research still focus on the text to the exclusion of considering the changes the writer, the reader, and the world undergo in the writing process. Writers compose not only a text, but a self, an "other" in the reader, and a version of reality. Thus writing can be defined as an act of human understanding, that will allow us to explain not only how a writer composes but also why humans choose writing as a mode of cultural interaction. In this framework, researchers and practitioners can focus on the transforming nature of the composing process and use it to study human science through, for example, the study of autobiographies. Assigning autobiographical narratives to students helps teachers to understand the students (and students to understand themselves). Assigning students to describe an instance in which writing made a difference in their lives helps them come to a new understanding of their past experiences and redefine their expectations, so that they realize that writing is not just an act performed for grades. This change comes from the process of writing, not from the text that students produce. (SKC)

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CAUGHT IN THE WRONG ACT:

COMPOSING PROCESS THEORY FOR A SCIENCE OF HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

It was the first week of class and I had a new topic for the diagnostic essay assignment. I wrote the instructions on the board: "Tell about a time when writing something has made an important difference in your life. Write an essay in which you tell about a time when your writing brought about a change in the way you live. The writing you did can be anything from signing a contract to writing a novel."

When I finished writing, I turned around to face the class, expecting to see what I usually saw--students bent over their desks scribbling, biting their pens, or looking into space for inspiration. Instead they were looking at me--looking surprised and puzzled.

The stunned silence we shared was broken by a question from the back of the room "What if you can't think of a time. . .?"

It was my turn to be startled. But I drew on all my resources as an experienced teacher and said, "Make up something." We shared a laugh of relief and they went to work--bending over their desks, biting their pencils, or staring into space for inspiration.

While they wrote, I sat puzzling over what had just happened. They had to have had considerable experience with writing--they were college freshmen. Had they all reached this point without ever knowing that writing could make a change in

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their lives? What did they think writing was for? Why were they enrolled in a composition class?

A week later, when I met my students in their small group tutorials, I asked them two questions: "What outcome did you expect from doing the writing you will do for this class when you enrolled?" and "Has anyone ever encouraged you to write?" Throughout that week of tutorials, I heard the same answers over and over again: They would learn the writing skills they needed to pass the class so they could pass other classes so they could graduate so they could get a job. As to whether anyone had encouraged their writing--"Not really."

So I asked them to tell me what they did receive praise and encouragement for. What they were good at. What was their area of performance. They were eager to tell me and the other students in their small groups what they did well and the things they liked to do for an appreciative audience. Four of the forty-four described their joy in musical performance--singing a solo or singing in choirs, playing the piano, playing the tuba in the marching band. One was proud of the way he could tell jokes and carry on a conversation. Another was a poet. Two said they weren't good at anything. The remaining thirty-seven told me about playing some sport--football, basketball, swimming, track, golf, bowling, tennis.

Now, let me assure you, I did not have more than my share of star athletes in my classes that semester. There were three or four varsity team members. The rest played on intramural teams or kept up their participation in sports through some other means. They were not star athletes, but they had somehow found

the recognition, the joy, the reasons in sports that kept them involved, that motivated them to find time in their busy schedules for playing on a bowling league team, reserving and keeping a date for the racketball court, running one to ten miles.

Student are involved in sports because they like it--because it's doing something for them. It's good for their bodies, yes. But more important to these eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds, it's also improving their self-images, making them confident in their strength, helping them learn self-discipline and figure out how to get along with others. As they talked about this in their small group tutorials, I was wishing they were saying these things about writing as well as about sports.

In this essay I want to explore the reasons why so many of these students entered my composition classroom unable to think of any time their having written had made an important change in their lives. There are a number of places to put the blame for this, but instead of rehearsing the faults of others I'd like instead to examine some current composition pedagogy--the assumptions with which we teachers enter our classrooms and the reasons we offer our students when we exhort them to write. Those expectations and assumptions are evident in our theories, our research, and our classroom practices.

I want to examine here one area of composition theory research and practice in particular--the composing process. It is not necessary for me to review the composing porcess research and theory that has enlivened and given direction to our discipline

in the last ten to fifteen years. The theory and research of Emig, Perl, Sommers, and Flower and Hayes as well as others[1] has so fundamentally and universally changed the way we talk about what we're doing that it is next to impossible now to find even a composition textbook that is not "process-oriented," to use the phrase of the publisher's sales representatives who visit my office.

In making this change, we have separated the process from the product of that process. It has been a useful distinction. But our theory, research and practice is still text-centered. The process paradigm as it now stands examines the evolution of the text, but little more. We are caught in the wrong act: focussing our attention on the process of composing a text to the exclusion of considering the changes the writer, the reader, and the world all undergo in the writing process.

The composing process includes much more than the evolution of a text and the writer is much more than a cognitively sophisticated word processor capable of taking the raw data of sensation in the form of perception and turning it into texts for the reader's consumption. In the act of composing, the writer changes, the reader changes, the world changes. The writer composes not only a text, but a self, an other in the reader, a version of reality. Composing is not only a process of knowing, it is also a way of doing--a way of taking action.

I propose that we define writing as human action--and more precisely as an act of human understanding. This will allow us to elaborate a theory, conduct research, and develop a pedagogy which offers not only an explanation of <u>how</u> a writer composes a

text, but also an apology for why a human chooses writing as a made of cultural interaction.

Adopting the terms of Kenneth Burke's dramatistic pentad as presented in A Grammar of Motives, in the act of writing the text is the agency. And as C. W. Lewis has observed, contemporary composition pedagogy has tenedd to over-privilege either the agency or the agent (writer) and thereby underestimated, underrated, and undermined the student writer's ability and capacity to "act with language" (374). Lewis has suggested a new conceptual basis for classifying types of discourse. When discourse is conceived as an act with "dynamic interactive qualities," rather than an agency with "static and prescriptive qualitie," expressive writing or writer-centered discourse is seen as an act which transforms the conception of self. Persuasive writing or reader-based discourse is considered an act which aims to transform an audience's attitudes and values; argument and analysis/synthesis or content-based discourse is seen as an act of ordering and reordering (375). This Burkean classification system also implies a transformed conception of the composing process. A Burkean paradigm of the composing process, centered on the act of transforming rather than the agency of transformation, could broaden our study of the composing process to include a consideration of the changes reader, writer, and reality undergo in the process of composing.

Such a study of the composing process would be a wholly human science. In making this assertion, I adopt the definition of the human sciences proposed by Wilhelm Dilthey, the 19th

century German philosopher who influenced Husserl and many other phenomenologists and hermeneuticists.[2]

Dilthey's central project was an investigation of the ways man knows man through everyday contact and through human studies. Man must be studied, Dilthey maintained, differently from the way the rest of nature is studied, because human beings can report or comment to other human beings upon their thought and feelings. The human sciences can--and must--address matters of the human mind, heart, will and spirit for it is these traits that make us more than and different from the physical world we shape into our realities. Dilthey recommends a methodology for studying the human sciences which includes an examination of the means by which humans achieve understanding. One of those means is communicating with one another by narrating life experience--autobiography.

Autobiography serves as a means for achieving human understanding, for it is not simply an expression of self, it is also a creation and interpretation of self. That is, the autobiographer reads and writes in order to create a context--a social, cultural, and intellectual context--for the self. Autobiography can create this context for the self because storytelling is a cultural occasion, a uniquely <u>human</u> act.

Autobiography is both an act of understanding by humans and a source of understanding of humans. The autobiographer's discourse re-creates the patterns and plots which his socio-cultural experience has taught him. His discourse thus reflects and reinforces, by retelling his culture's myths and re-using his culture's metaphors, that culture's collective reality. A

contributor to this collective reality, autobiography is a cultural document. As such, it is a source of infomration for anyone desiring a better uuderstanding of the myths and ideology of the culture in which and from which it arises.

Lest it seem that my discourse on autobiography has strayed too far afield from a discussion of the relation of composing process theory to a science of human understanding, let me return to those diagnostic essays, my students' narratives of hard-to remember significant writing experiences. For these autobiographical narratives helped me to understand my students and helped my students to understand themselves. I have classified the narratives of the thirty-seven students who completed my composition course according to the situation which was the scene for the writing experience related and the kinds of change the writers describe.

Three wrote narratives about participating in writing contests. One of the two who were winners wrote, "Once people read and liked my poetry, I felt better about myself. I felt I had something to do besides homework and work." The other said she had learned the importance of "saying what you really think." The third had not won any prize, but said that having written the essay about her family had made her realize how important they were to her.

Five students chose the contract-signing option and related how writing their signatures had changed their employment status, their living situations, their obligations.

Seven told stories of writing which had made a difference in

their personal lives. One told how writing notes during class had started a romance, one how letter writing had restored a relationship[, another how personal journal writing had helped him understand the end of a relationship, another about how a letter had convinced a friend to heed his advice, another how keeping a prayer journal had led to better understanding and greater faith.

Four of the thirty-seven write about writing related to work. One was a fantasy in which a letter of apology to the store manager for having offended a customer moved the owner of the company to offer an executive position. Two were about job application essays hat had won them employment. The other was about becoming more effective in a counseling job through writing descriptions of his work with youth.

Sixteen wrote about writing in school. Nine of these told stories of how writing in school had given them a different perspective on life, given them confidence, or taught them self-discipline. Three essays were about how writing a particular paper had made it possible for them to get a better grade or to graduate. Two others told stories of how writing in school had given them a different perspective on life, changed their self-images. Of the group only two told how writing in school was <u>going to</u> make a difference in their future employability.

All but two of these students eventually thought of some way in which writing had already brought about a change. But they needed a while to remember it (or perhaps to make it up) because they weren't used to thinking in those terms. They had had too-ready an answer to why they were enrolled in a required writing

course--to improve their skills so they could pass courses so they could stay in and eventually get out of school, so they could get and keep good jobs. That answer is the socio-cultural myth which they believe is shaping their experience and according to which they believe they are living their lives. But their experience has not lived up to these myths. And in the act of writing their autobiographical essays they recognized a dissonance between that myth they have learned from their society, their parents, perhaps even their teachers and their own personal myths.

The assignment had begun as a prompt for a diagnostic essay intended to give me an indication of my students' knowledge of writing as well as their performance of writing. It became a point of crisis for me and my students when it forced us to recognize a dissonance between my assumptions about writing and theiirs. And it eventually led to a writing experience which brought about a change in their lives. In writing these autobiographical narratives, they came to a new understanding of their past experiences and redefined their expectations.

This is one of the changes I want my students to experience during the composing process. This change is one interesting product of the process. Writing is more than an operation on texts. It is something we do to ourselves, to others, to our world. We all know this. It is not news. But we've ingnored it and neglected to consider it in our formal theory, research, and ultimately the pedagogy to which the theory and research often lead. In the terms of Kenneth Burke's pentad, we are caught in

the wrong act. Writing is not merely the act of producing a text. It is an act of achieving human understanding.

I do not suggest that we forget about texts--texts are powerful agencies of change. But they are only agencies, not the agents themselves. We must remember why we care about the text, remember the purpose of our efforts as literacy educators. Our students must be encouraged to see themselves as agents of change and encouraged to choose writing as an agency for the changes they want to effect in themselves and their world.

Let's expand composition pedagogy. Let's expand our definition of writing to the following: writing is a way for humans to achieve understanding of themselves and one another.

Notes

[1] For a summary and review of this research, see Hairston's "Winds of Change."

[2] Dilthey's concept of human sciences may have had its own origin in the ideas of Giambattista Vico, and could probably be traced even further back to Cicero's identification between wisdom and eloquence.

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